

## Govt Healthcare

## More Rhetoric than Real Action

Deep Azad writes from Khulna

**The government with help from the USAID has opened thousands of Green Umbrellas to reach better healthcare to the rural poor. Many are still left uncovered by the umbrellas.**

or other spiritual healers not medical doctors can help them.

Doctors are also not available when patients need them. Also there are not enough doctors at the health centres. This is another factor that discourages women to visit the health centres.

Women are too shy to discuss these diseases with the men in their families. They feel more at home with the spiritual healers, many of them women. The spiritual healers are always nice to their patients. Women feel at ease to discuss their problems in details with them," said Rafiqul Islam, a development worker in the area. According to him the quacks or spiritual healers are mostly known to the villagers. They are part of the society. They discuss not only diseases but the local problems too.

The quacks are more friendly to the women. That's why Green Umbrellas are still not popular," he said. The quacks and spiritual healers are flexible in their fees. So treatment is much cheaper. Medical doctors, according to some patients interviewed by News Network, prescribe costly medicines. On the other hand the quacks fix their fees

considering how much an individual patient can afford to pay. Thus the fee could be Tk. 20 for one patient, but for another Tk. 10 only. Those who are too poor to pay can get it free.

Quacks, herbal and spiritual healers are in plenty in the area. There are more than 150 of them in 10 unions of Rampal thana. 10 of them women. Among the women spiritual healers Nurul Bou is doing very well. No one knows what her real name is, but people come to her for relief. She charges only Tk 21 from each of the patients. She describes the fee as "fine" for wrongdoing. She breathes into a pot of water that patients are asked to drink or prescribe talisman.

At Srisfaltala village in Rampal thana this correspondent spoke with Rahima, 27-year-old wife of a day labourer, mother of two children, one eight years old and the other two years. Despite poverty the family was doing fine until last year when Rahima started complaining about terrible headache and her poor eyesight. In just few months she became irregular in menstruation. Rahima, who used to work in a shrimp farm, went to a spiritual healer who diagnosed her

as a victim of an evil spirit. "The osha spiritual healer told me I came across the evil spirit while working in the shrimp field," she said.

The spiritual healers are successful only in a few cases. But that is enough to sustain their reputation because the illiterate women want to trust them. Muslim Fakir of Sadar union, Shaiful Islam of Rajnagar union and Khaleque Moulana of Gouranga union are among the most sought after kabirajs in the area.

Government health workers are still not able to match the traditional healers.

"There are more rhetoric than real action in the government health sector. They promise tall but money available in the sector is too small to reach the poor patients," said a government health worker, speaking on condition he can't be identified.

Green Umbrella is part of the National Family Planning and Mother and Child Care Strategy of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The seven-year (1993-2000) strategy aims to reach basic health care to the rural poor and raise the contraceptive prevalence rate.

At present 77,000 health and family planning workers — 17,000 of them from voluntary agencies — are out in the villages.

None of them has yet crossed the path of Namita Rani Karmakar who goes to a traditional healer whenever she becomes ill.

— News Network

## Health Hazards from Pollution

by Durga Ray

"Human health and well-being should be the foundation of environmental policy and health-oriented environmental action should be an essential component of all programmes for social and economic development," CSE Chairperson V. Ramalingaswamy said.

Academics, activists and researchers from universities, medical colleges, and premier scientific institutions from within the country and abroad presented their study papers at the conference.

Some of the studies presented at the conference, which concluded on July 9, contained alarming data about the effects of different forms of pollution and the epidemics that result from it.

While pointing to the

massive spread of viral hepatitis in India and around, a study said no proper diagnosis or vaccine was available for this disease which affects both children and adults, but is particularly severe in pregnant women.

Another alarming finding related to the presence of DDT in the body fat of people living in Delhi. A study said that Delhiites recorded one of the highest levels of DDT in the world.

In view of the harmful effects of DDT on the ecosystem and human health, the conference recommended limited and selective use of the chemical until alternative and affordable vector control strategies are in place.

The conference zoomed in on

a host of issues, including those which may have been relegated to the background so far. One of them related to noise pollution.

Although data available on noise pollution is scarce, a study presented at the conference said that there has been a sharp increase in noise pollution in recent times in India due to rapid industrialisation and increasing use of individual transportation. Noise pollution affects children's reading abilities, it said.

Radiological pollution, in focus after India's nuclear blasts in the Thar desert, figured prominently at the meet. A survey of five villages within 10 kilometres of an atomic power plant in the western state of Rajasthan revealed high incidence of congenital deformities, miscarriages, one-day deaths, still births — IANS.

## Buddha's Nuclear Smile Turns to Radioactive Tears

The recent atomic tests by India and Pakistan have alarmed their smaller neighbours. Gemini News Service reports on concern in Nepal over the potentially damaging consequences of increased nuclear activity in the region, including environmental contamination and meteorological and seismic instability.

Prakash Khanal writes from Kathmandu

"Buddha has smiled," Indian scientists told their prime minister, Indira Gandhi, after their successful nuclear weapons test in 1974. But he didn't smile on Nepal.

"Buddha has wept" would sum up the view of most Nepalis, now that all their major neighbours — China, India and Pakistan — are nuclear powers.

The recent atomic tests by New Delhi and Islamabad have made Nepalis acutely aware of the dangers of fall-out, both from a nuclear arms race and from the possibility of accidents in nuclear installations.

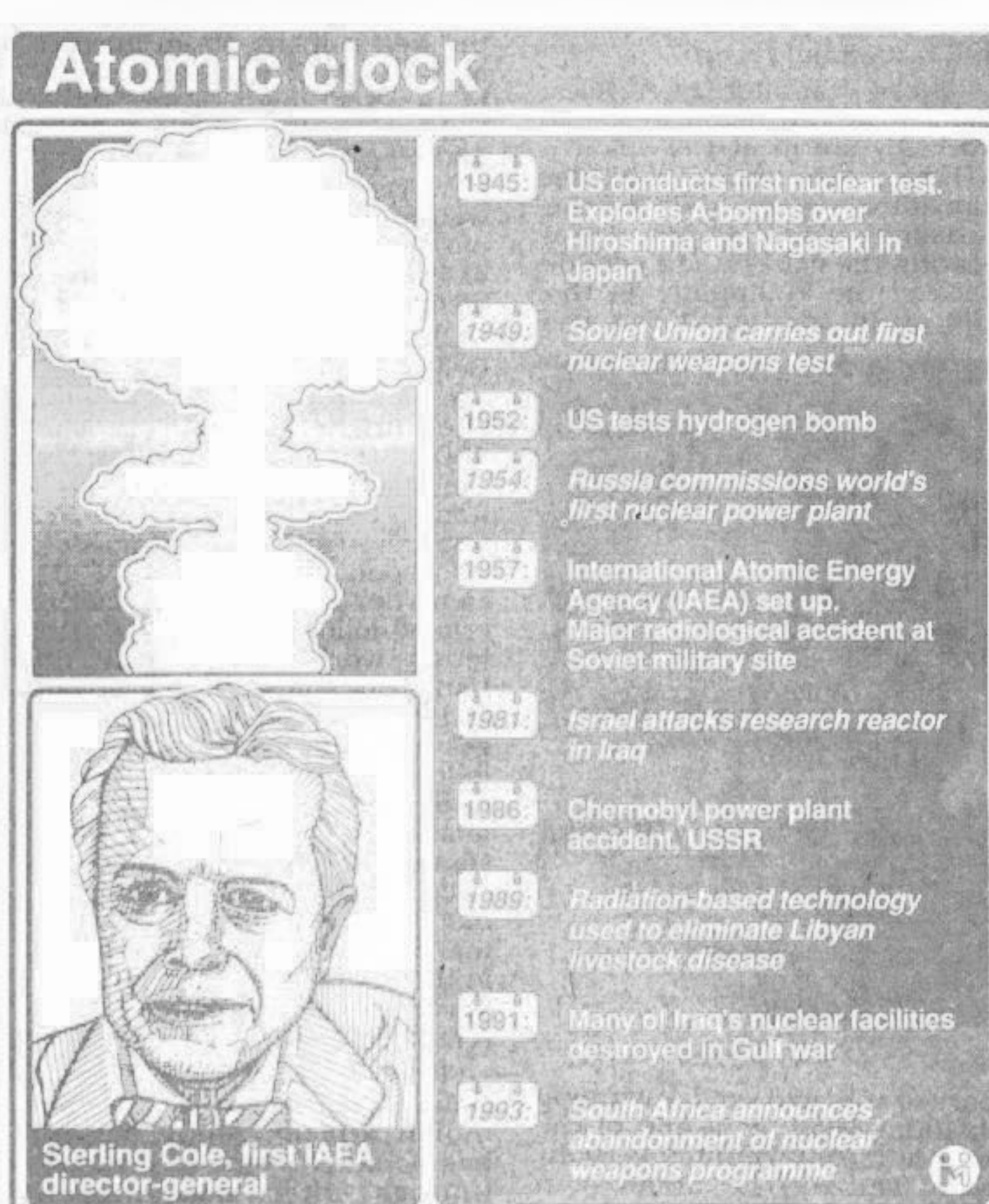
If an accident in India's Naurara reactor in 1993 had not been kept under control, argues Dr Kamal Krishna Shrestha, a nuclear chemist in Nepal's Tribhuvan University chemistry department, his country would have suffered heavy casualties.

The mountainous kingdom is also thought to be seismically vulnerable to the effects of nuclear tests. There are fears of landslides and even earthquakes being triggered.

Testing "creates environmental problems and very easily induces erratic weather patterns, not because of nuclear emissions but because of the tremendous amount of heat generated during such explosions," said Dr Devi Datta Paudyal, a nuclear physicist and a member of Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology.

Besides this, he pointed out: "We are surrounded by nations which have many nuclear installations in the form of nuclear reactors and nuclear facilities and there might be accidents in these installations."

India and Pakistan had taken a lot of precautions, "but we shouldn't forget that radiation still seeps through the thick walls of nuclear reactors



Sterling Cole, first IAEA director-general

and nuclear facilities."

He wants Nepal to undertake

its own monitoring programme, a plea echoed by Dr Shrestha, who called for the immediate establishment of a task force of nuclear physicists, chemists, biologists and food specialists. Their job would be to formulate a plan to measure radiation levels in the air, water, soil and food in residential areas and in the Himalayas.

"It may take us 20 years, but we should begin now," he said.

A national programme should be included in the forthcoming ninth five-year development plan and we should chalk out five-to 25-year programmes, step by step."

Dr Shrestha, who has outlined his plans in a report to the ministry of population and environment, pointed out that Nepal's neighbours had nuclear weapons sites at Lop Nor in western China, at Pokhran in India and in the Chagai hills in Pakistan.

Fortunately, since 1973 the testing of nuclear weapons had been carried out underground only, not on the surface, in the atmosphere or under water.

However, Dr Shrestha stressed: "The problem has reached our doorstep, so we must take the first step."

There was a real possibility of contamination by harmful levels of radiation, "so we should get ready to meet such challenges".

And the first step, he and many scientists agree, is to join the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear body. One benefit of this might be assistance with acquiring monitoring devices. Nepal has virtually none of its own.

Sophisticated equipment was in place to monitor China's 1973 tests, but was subsequently taken back by the Belgian laboratory with which Nepal was cooperating in a joint project.

Another past monitoring programme, the Himalayan Meteorological and Environmental Research Expedition, run in conjunction with Japanese scientists, collected evidence of some radioactivity and seismic effects in Nepal from China's nuclear tests.

Another issue has been raised by Dr Tika Karki, director of the National Food Research Laboratory in Kathmandu: the need to keep a check on imports of food from India that might have been contaminated by radiation.

He described it as a big challenge, saying: "We faced enough such problems after the accident at Chernobyl (nuclear power station in Ukraine) in 1986. This time there is also a risk, so monitoring and measuring the level of nuclear radiation of food items would be a timely step."

The writer is a freelance Nepalese journalist.

## Beauty and Biology: The Shangri-La

by Richard Mahapatra

The forest cover in Sikkim in 1988 was 50 per cent of the land area and by the mid-1990s it was down to 44 per cent. Currently it stands at 36.3 per cent, according to N C Shenga of the Sikkim Forest Department.

THE children of Sikkim only get to see their state's flora and fauna preserved on light-sensitive paper — photographs taken in the early part of the century by the British. And if conservation activity is not speeded up, even the existing species may vanish — remaining on paper alone.

The Gazetteer of Sikkim, published in 1928, remains the only comprehensive source of information on flora and fauna. Compiled from studies conducted by British travellers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it identified over 200 mammals, some 2,600 species of butterflies and moths, and 550 birds — accounting for nearly 30 per cent of the entire bird population of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka combined.

The small state is home to some 5,000 flowering plants and trees, and 400 non-flowering plants like ferns, lichens, liverworts, algae and fungi. About 2 per cent of these are found exclusively in Sikkim. But most of them are now on the decline.

Flowering plants like gladiolus, primula, potentilla, iris, gentian, anemone and orchids thrive in Sikkim. Rhododendrons grow profusely on the Singaila range, bordering Sikkim and Nepal. But these flowers dominating whole hillsides, which blush in shades of pink, orange and red, may soon turn rare for lack of sound conservation.

The tale of Sikkim's orchids is sad and proof of the deteriorating state of affairs. The state has close to 600 orchid species. According to R C Upadhyay, director of the National Orchid Research Centre (NORC), Gangtok, most of the endemic orchids are either extinct or non-traceable.

The NORC was established in 1996 to study orchids and develop strategies for their conservation. In 1976, India ratified CITES. Two years later, a blanket ban was imposed on export of orchids. The ban followed reports that exporters, who claim they were selling cultivated plants, were over-exploiting the wild. The ban was subsequently lifted in 1979, but the problem remains.

Medicinal plants like Aconitum species, Artemisia vulgaris, kutki (Picrorhiza kurroa) and jatamansi (Nardostachys grandiflora) found in high altitude grasslands, are also threatened by over-grazing and over-harvesting of medicinal and flowering plants.

The forest cover in Sikkim in 1988 was 50 per cent of the land area and by the mid-1990s it was down to 44 per cent. Currently it stands at 36.3 per cent, according to N C Shenga of the Sikkim Forest Department.

Around 144 mammals are known to exist in Sikkim, according to the Sikkim forest department (Administrative report, 1995-96). Of these, 39 have been declared rare and endangered under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act,

1972. The east Himalayan tahr or 'shapi' has been found only west of Tsunghang, at Pimphu and along the ridges of Lamaangden. According to forest department estimates (based on sighting), its population may be between 70-100 heads. The Himalayan langur and Assamese macaque have also been found in these areas.

There are three animals that have been very rarely sighted in the past decade or so — the red panda, musk deer and bharal (blue sheep, Pseudois nayaur). Alpine musk deer (Moschus sifancus) and forest musk deer (Moschus chrysogaster) are reported to be found in 12 locations in north and west Sikkim, and in Kangchendzonga National Park. Since illegal trade in musk obtained from its pod has continued over the years and the animal is hardly ever sighted in sanctuaries today.

In fact, the phrase "as rare as a red panda" just about describes the fate of the state animal of Sikkim. People who live near the park say that ten years ago the red panda could easily be spotted by visitors to the park. Now the animal seems to have disappeared. The last time a red panda was sighted was in 1995, after a gap of two years.

The natural draining of the famous Green Lake in Kangchendzonga National Park has also endangered the population of bharal. A group of about 100 bharal lived off vegetation that the lake supported. After the draining and reduction in vegetation, the last time these animals were spotted was in 1993, when two small herds consisting of 10 and seven individuals were seen.

The case of butterflies of Sikkim is not dissimilar. Reports that trade in butterflies

(that are mounted by collectors) is threatening their existence in the Northeast have not been officially confirmed. Indeed, well-known species like 'Gem Silver Spot' and 'Blue Apollo' can still be seen at altitudes above 3,962 m.

But in *Butterflies of Sikkim*, the first catalogue published in 1988 by Elwes and Mollers, 536 species were listed. The number currently reported by the Sikkim forest department is 422 species. The status of 114 species remains uncertain.

A major factor accounting for the decline in species in Sikkim is lack of study of the ecosystem and inadequate conservation. As A R K Sastry, director, Biodiversity 'Hotspots' Conservation Programme (BHCPC) of the World Wide Fund for Nature says: "Studies conducted on the biodiversity of Sikkim are not enough to enumerate all species. Every scientific expedition to the state results in discovery of new species."

"Unscientific harvesting of the plants is one of the reasons for rapid depletion of flora. Where only the leaf of a plant is required for medicinal use, people destroy the whole plant."

Deforestation, landslides, high-altitude human colonisation, development and power projects, uncontrolled grazing, and crucial ecological links between flora and fauna can together account for the extinction of species in Sikkim, according to Sastry.

P S Ramakrishnan of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is of the opinion that sudden human interference in the pristine ecology of Sikkim may have led to a chain of extinction of species.

Until 1980, Sikkim hosted a mere 1,000 tourists per year. Between 1988 and 1994, tourists arrivals grew 155 per cent and

crossed the 100,000 mark in 1995. Since 1980, international tourist arrivals has hovered around 6,000 and the domestic tourist arrivals have increased from 12,862 in 1980 to 100,400 in 1997.

To cater to tourists, infrastructural activity has increased, changing land use and affecting the environment. Also, fascinated by the natural beauty of Sikkim, tourists have made inroads into hitherto undisturbed, environmentally fragile areas leading to degradation of forests, change in density and composition of species and loss of rare plants. Damage to plant life, in turn, has affected wildlife.

The greatest single problem, then, that has led to environmental degradation and loss of species is lack of awareness on the part of researchers and the government. The techniques used to study flora and fauna have been inadequate, unmethodical and inconsistent.

The climatic variation in Sikkim is such that a comprehensive study needs tremendous effort and huge resources. Although a greater part of land in the state is owned by the department of forests, it is not equipped to deal with the problem.

At the same time, the state has not been accorded the attention it deserves by research bodies like the Botanical Survey of India, the Zoological Survey of India and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. The efforts of some individuals and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) have paid dividends, but the state of scientific study of biodiversity in Sikkim is far from satisfactory.

The forest department's annual administrative report of 1996-97 shows its helplessness — only 19 mammals (total species 144) were listed as the principal endangered species even though forest officials informally admit that at least 20 other species are highly endangered and many have not been sighted for the past two decades.

There is an urgent need to conduct research on endemic and vulnerable plant and animal species in the state and their inter-relationships.

Even more important is the need to institute well-tested conservation management practices, like setting up a protected areas network. Currently, as Sikkim forest secretary P K Basnet admits, only 29 per cent of the total land is under protected areas. According to the state forest department's estimates, fuelwood consumption alone will rise to about eight lakh cubic metres by the turn of the century.

Unless woodlands are given a protected status, and local people given incentives to grow commercial species in buffer areas — a practice recently initiated by the forest department — the future of forests and all plant and animal species in Sikkim is grim.

CSE/Down To Earth Features

## The Road to Reason at Fraser's Hill

A road scheme in the Malaysian highlands threatens one of the country's most beautiful and sensitive areas. Among its key functions is the education of a new generation about the vital role environmental protection plays in their lives.

by Leyla Alyanak Malaysia

THE wildlife reserve known as Fraser's Hill in Peninsular Malaysia is one of the country's most beautiful and popular hill stations. At 1,300 metres above the sea, these highlands are home to a quarter of Malaysia's plant species, 260 bird species and more than 1,200 species of orchid. Fraser's Hill and the other two highland resorts in the area attract more than 600,000 visitors a year.

Among those visitors are groups of young people brought to a WWF — World Wide Fund for Nature — Malaysia nature education centre where they are shown in practical terms how their environment is vital to their survival.

"We try to give them hands-on experience," says Tan Fong Kew, education officer for WWF-Malaysia. "We teach them to be observant by playing games, and to notice the relationships between things around them. Too often, people take their environment for granted."

Taking nature for granted is precisely what WWF wants to avoid and Fraser's Hill wildlife reserve is the perfect place to start. In addition to its sheer natural beauty, the 500-kilometre Main Range is the most important water catchment area for Peninsular Malaysia and the source of many rivers.

Noorhayatul Nufus and

Sabariah Basir were among a party of 33 students aged between 16 and 32 who took part in a nature discovery weekend at Fraser's Hill. Among other activities, they were blindfolded and encouraged to walk a forest trail with nothing but touch, hearing and smell to guide them.

"This has done a lot to build my self-esteem and make me brave," Noorhayatul said. "I'm not used to nature and I was scared of the sensations and the smells."

For Sabariah Basir, it was more a question of mud. "When my eyes are open, I rarely bother to look around me," she said. "But with my eyes covered, on my knees, crawling in the mud, I know I am at one with nature."

The close encounter with nature is new to many of these visitors from the city. Away from the polluted haze, owls hoot in the forest at night and by day the din of birdsong competes with wildlife sightings for their attention.

But all of this could end if developers have their way. A proposed plan to link this and two other hill resorts by a road over the mountains has upset conservationists.

"The road would be an unspeakable environmental catastrophe," said Sabri Zain, a

spokesperson for WWF-Malaysia, "not only for the highlands, but for the country as a whole."

The proposed road would cut through water catchment areas, threatening Malaysia with water shortages. Not only would it mar the countryside but it would also cause dangerous soil erosion. In this rainy region, mudslides killed 37 people in 1996 and 21 the year before.

About 3,000 millimetres of rain falls on the highlands each year, and protective vegetation keeps waterlogged slopes from sliding downhill. Much of that vegetation would be lost if the road were built.

WWF stresses it is not fundamentally opposed to development. "What is needed is careful review and monitoring of any form of land use in the highlands," said Sabri Zain. "Whether it is new resort development, road building, or agriculture, we have to identify where in the highlands it should take place and where it should not."

The highlands have won an unexpected — if temporary — reprieve. The recent fall in the value of Malaysia's currency forced the government to rethink several of its projects, including the highway road, and some observers suggest that what was economically feasible

five years ago may no longer be so.

The government insists the project has merely been postponed, but WWF hopes decision-makers will take this opportunity to re-examine the road's overall feasibility. As the authorities already know, road building in Malaysia can be full of surprises.

The East-West highway, which links the coasts across the Main Range, is an example of what can go wrong when things are not thought through. In 1991, inspectors found 151 erosion-prone areas along the highway. The repair cost US\$6 million.

After a weekend close to nature in the highlands, at least some young people will have a better understanding of the vital connection between themselves and their environment. This is the first step in sensible development.

"Where will you go if the air keeps getting worse?" WWF's Tan Fong Kew asked the students at Fraser's Hill. With a thick, slummy haze hanging like a grey cloak over the capital, Kuala Lumpur, the highlands are one of the few avenues of escape. "If these are destroyed, where will you run to?"

Good question.

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Switzerland

By Hanna-Barbera

